Matt Olson (MO)

Matt Olson is a Minneapolis-based artist and founder of the studio OOIEE (Office of Interior Establishing Exterior). Much of his work involves exploring obscure moments in the history of contemporary art, and transforming them in ways that feel both intimate and powerful. Running throughout Olson's work are notions of "in between," "bothness," "open practice," and, perhaps most importantly, "love." Each one (but especially the last) feel critical to understanding and embracing the idea of bootlegging. In a work that has long resonated with me, Olson recreates an iconic Donald Judd chair out of birdseed, which is then left outside and picked by birds, slowly over time, down to nothing. The piece is a reminder that ideas are "in the air," they are available for use by anyone, but eventually must be returned back to where they came from.
Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS)

BS: For me, bootlegs are inherently hard to define. Everyone I speak to has a different definition, idea, or perspective on the gesture. So I'd like to begin with a seemingly simple, but in reality very complex question: how would you define bootlegging?

MO: I guess if writing poetry is the act of embedding more meaning into words than we normally allow—by intentionally arranging and sometimes "misusing" words and their rules—and through that, we end up with something more expansive.... I guess I'd say a bootleg moves like poetry. That spirit is one of the things I love about bootlegs, they're more about *expanding* something, than *authoring* something.

They're hard to define (like everything). I notice these phenomena too, that when I set out to define a word, it's easy to forget the actual goal is to develop a *space* of understanding. And I have this bad habit of thinking it's about *narrowing* and should feel inherently *reductive*. It even registers as sort of somatic I think, so it's a deep habit? But when I say it out loud, the idea of "shrinking" the way to understanding seems flawed. And what *actually* happens, the more I think about something, the "bigger" it gets. It's becoming *less* clear even as my understanding grows. And I think bootlegs do that too.

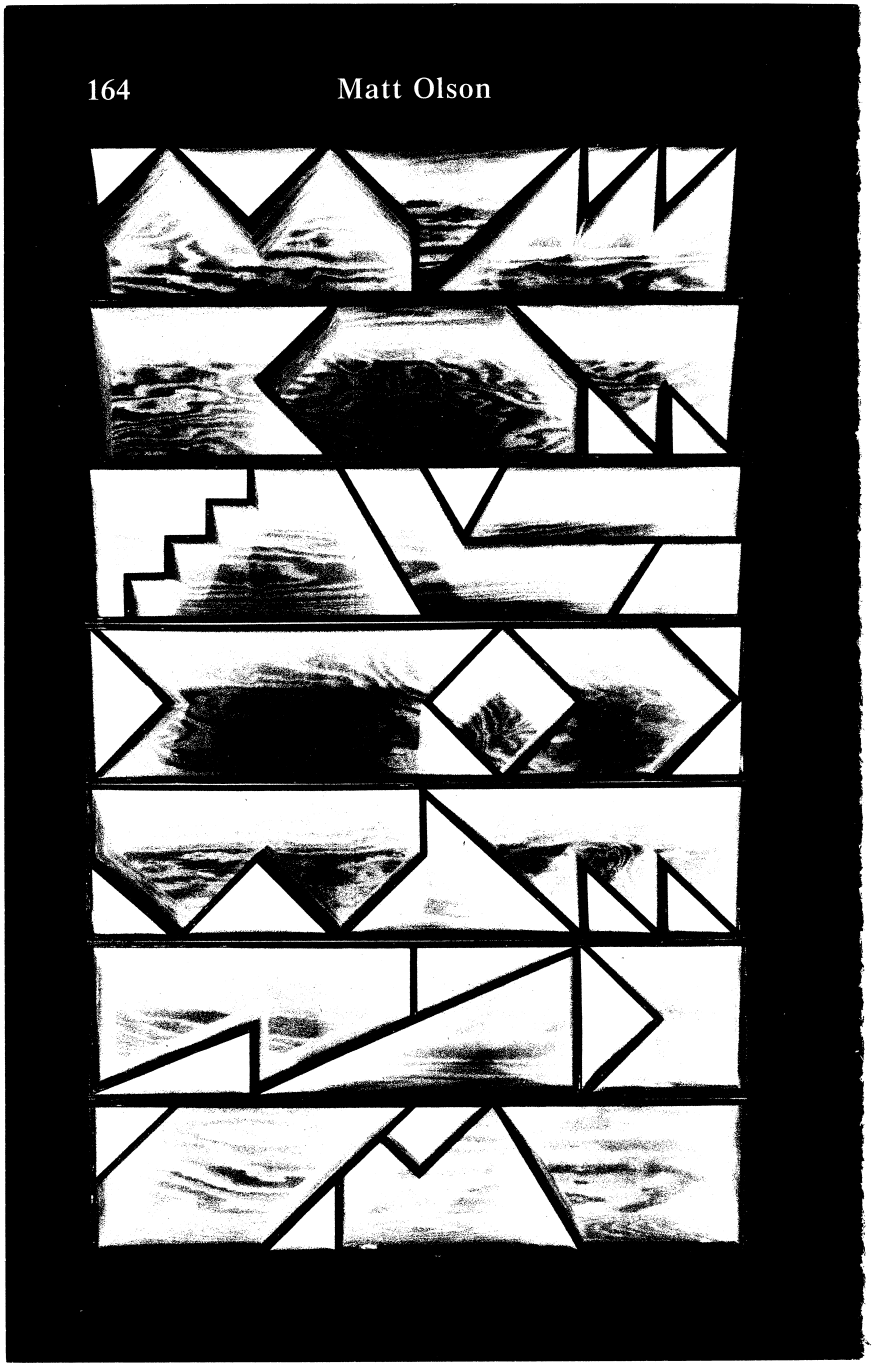
To some degree, I'm interested in the whole spectrum of related meanings around bootlegs. Even piracy, which seems straightforwardly about capitalism at first glance—but I'm *super* interested in the ways that people participate in misleading themselves and others with stories and symbols. Appropriation is/was more high art but maybe recently is being used more in the socio-cultural identity politics realm? Also fascinating. There's the kind of bootleg that is very fashionable "now"—mostly T-shirts and clothes, with "brand" being the most common location for... play or whatever it is. But I'm most interested in the broader and more foundational questions about the nature of separateness in general. Are things separate from me? Do ideas "belong" to people? Can we really own things?

I think OOIEE's work is related for sure and, initially, I actually used the term bootleg sometimes because people wanted to call it "appropriation," which didn't feel right. I've always described our work as being "related to art and design" and often call our version of bootlegging "using art history as a material." I still feel that.

Some of these themes and attitudes have been moving me around all my life, but I guess in terms of "work," I can trace it back to 2008. Initially it involved seeing photos of work by people like Scott Burton and Guy de Cointet on the internet and free from much context, and I was just totally lit up by them. I felt like I had to respond. I was seeing photos on blogs and something was happening, building up and... I couldn't *not* move with it. I was also starting to see, feel, and consider it all through the lens of Sturtevant, who's been especially important for me. By doing the work, I could become it.

The studio started making some Scott Burton chairs in plywood and soon we were attempting to make the sets of Guy de Cointet performances from the 1970s out of MDF. I could totally go off about it all... The de Cointet sets didn't exist outside of photos—no one had kept the objects—so in a way it felt like we were rescuing them or something? Carrying them forward. Extending them. Repeating them. There's just *so much* to say. Too much, really. There's always been such an aliveness in this space for me, and it feels like the projects come to get me as much as I "decide" to do them. I wasn't totally sure what I was doing. Almost just following some energy forward.

Later I started finding humility, poetics, positive uncertainty, anonymity, a new sort of access to things and ideas that are extremely charged. And it wasn't



really meant to be "against authorship" in a binary sense, but I definitely wanted to run counter to it. Some sort of refusal of dislocation of those stories. A resistance to the notion of "individuation." I agree with Fred Moten who said individuation is a) impossible and b) undesirable. The story of authorship is a part of what holds this whole tired and boring set of language/thought systems together. Stories of academic and institutional power and historical framing, ownership, ego, self-centeredness.

What I'm interested in is love. I like to fall in love with things and then *move* with them. I don't know for sure where that delivers us, or me, but that's why I like it. It's a form of care. I refuse to let the story of authorship and separateness give shape to the things I love. I love motion. I think bootlegs are in motion.

> BS: I recently watched the film *Certified Copy*, where the main character writes a book about the value of a copy. He states that the power of a copy is in its ability to bring us closer to an original. I'm interested in how this might relate to your practice. Is there a desire to become closer or engage in a more intimate way with art history? How does your relationship with a subject like Scott Burton or Donald Judd change after "bootlegging" one of their pieces?

MO: I watched this movie on your recommendation, I liked it! But I don't really believe in the story of "the original"—I mean it sorta lives in me by habit, but I can usually see past it. I remember writing songs

p. 164: RO/LU, *Seven Stacked Benches (after shelves)* (2012)

in my twenties. I was in a band and occasionally we'd devolve into an argument about who wrote what part. It was always so embarrassing and awkward. Unnatural. I knew deeply it was wrong. But at the time I just played along. It's hard not to? I still play along sometimes. It's messy. It's ego.

If you start unpacking all the different stories humans have memorized—and repeat—about authorship, property, originality, separateness, power, economics, capitalism, culture, status, hierarchy, institutional/academic/corporate authority—layers and layers—it all becomes pretty incoherent. That doesn't bother me though, I don't really wanna solve anything about that. I just wanna be in it.

I've told this story before about getting frustrated while we were building a Guy de Cointet set. Many of the early projects were self-initiated and unfunded so, no money and lots of hours, and even though I wanna resist that type of story—the money/time story—it has a way of finding its way in. Anyway, in a moment of frustration and fear at the studio, questioning the whole project I hollered out "Why in the fuck are we even doing this?" And Sammie Warren—who is amazing—said "We're learning from these things in ways that no one could teach us." I've never really stopped feeling that. I mean, *that's* the work. I love objects and ideas but it's the resulting motion(s)—how *we're* changed—how we become the things, people and ideas we love. Transformation is the result. What is the entropy of love?

BS: I like the idea that a bootleg might tell us more about a subject than an original. How does that idea resonate with you?

MO: I led a workshop at Cranbrook a few years ago. I have these photos of a bunch of Anthony Caro sculptures sitting outside, casually, in a rough gravel space. I loved them immediately when I saw them. Like, deeply. Electric. Can't explain it. More than his other work. Through some research, I learned this was a gravel parking area outside his studio when he taught at Bennington College and that the sculptures weren't really finished. So he's like this art history sculpture giant and here are all these objects which he may or may not have thought were sculptures. He wasn't famous yet. So the idea and act of making them and showing them—becoming them—not as *our* work or anyone's work, but as something we love that, through action, has the power to temporarily dissolve the barriers of stories. Not something to be "figured out" but as something we do.

Anyway, the workshop began with us reading five texts: "Pierre Menard, Author of The Quixote," Jorge Luis Borges, "Art Which Can't Be Art," Allan Kaprow, "I (Not Love) Information" and "Take Care" by Anthony Huberman, "Compatibility Mode," Seth Price (though thinking back, I wish I'd chosen "Decor Holes" by Seth Price... that would have been so much better!).

The whole point I guess was to examine the different stories we tell ourselves, all these layers of "thought and memory" we frame with, and then compare it to the experience we have in the lived realm. For me, they don't really match up. And I don't think that's bad, I think it's good. We should remember and accept this more frequently. The map is not the territory. Is an unfinished Anthony Caro piece an Anthony Caro? And, oddly, I gotta say, there's this Flaming Lips lyric that keeps coming to

mind: "we were perplexed, finding the needle, in the needle's disguise."

> BS: In your piece at the Aspen Art Museum, you used textiles with the sky printed on them to cover various works of art in the institution. In a lecture at Sci-Arc you spoke about conversations with artists asking for permission to cover their work. While I know you meant quite literally covering the work with textiles, I also think about "covering" in the sense of a cover song. Could you view these sky forms as OOIEE "cover songs" or "cover pieces?" Does the idea of "covering" mean something different than "bootlegging"?

MO: The artists in Aspen were all asked, not really for permission, but more just to check in. They were all into it. Anna Sew Hoy did a performance with the textile which, a person could say, brought it even further into her work or her into our work. The piece, which was called *No Separation*, did a lot of different things. Man, there's just so much I love about what happened with that. Those textiles were also made into wearable garments and people could check them out and wear them around town, on the slopes, et cetera. So the piece left the museum and encountered people who didn't know what it was. There's an anonymity and humility to that which is really exciting.

The Open Field residency at the Walker Art Center in 2012, 'When Does Something Become Something Else (The Apparent Is the Bridge To the Real),' has some similar stories and also involved checking in with like 25 artists to let them know we

were going to be remaking *their* work, with the public and then leaving the pieces outside on stages. Art performing art. A few people in the institution were *really* sensitive about the project—it felt like human fear/power stuff and was really fascinating and also made me feel kinda sick—but, all the artists or estates were good and a couple were actually excited we were doing it. Felix Gonzalez-Torres estate was into it and requested documentation. We remade *WAR IS OVER!* by John and Yoko—the public got a screen printing class and hundreds were made—Yoko wrote and thanked me. Those experiences have been super profound and freeing.

It's interesting how much music comes up as part of all this. I definitely see the "cover" connection in songs. I like that too because with a cover song, it's so clear that they are the same thing *and* completely different. I get even more excited thinking that maybe someone is singing along to a cover that they might not know is a cover, and they're laughing (or crying or spacing out or some combination) getting a few of the words wrong and also remembering something all while they're driving to GPS directions and they have a rock in their shoe... and on and on... that's a glimpse of what humanness is also like for me. That's a kind of music in itself.

BS: You often speak about the idea of "in betweenness." A bootleg seems to operate in this way, somewhere in between an original and reproduction. What effect does this idea have on how we understand bootlegs? In

pp. 170–171: OOIEE, Installation view of the exhibition 'There's No Separation' at Aspen Art Museum (2016)

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what way does this give a bootleg its sense of magic?

MO: Maybe I think everything is in between everything? Lately I prefer "bothness"... similar. But I have such a habit of falling into the trance of language, which often leads to the pattern of separateness as a way of thinking and perceiving. And I think the nature of reality is really *very* different. The truth of things is much more about interdependence and interconnectedness. Collage and aliveness. I think that's where the magic lives... in the potential. The not knowing.

To go further with the music space, I love the phenomenon of headphone bleed. I learned about it when I was first recording music in a studio. When you record a separate guitar track, for instance, you can always hear the faint trace of the drums which you played along with in the result. Most recording engineers work to hide or minimize it but it's there. For me, that's a good example of "bothness." And when you sit by someone on the train and you can hear the music someone is listening to... I like that kind of thing. It's the same song I'm hearing, same recording, but it's not the same as the person with the headphones on. It's an experience not a thought. The magicness of anything is about love and love naturally expands. Bootlegs for sure!

BS: I'm interested in the work you make and its relationship to translation. How do you think about the material shifts that take place in your work? What happens when drawings from Guy de Cointet become directions or furniture? How does a Burton chair change when it is made from plywood?

> What does it communicate differently, more clearly, or maybe even incorrectly?

MO: The answer for me is still "I don't really know." But I do love translation. It's built of motion, transformation and all its entropies. And again my interest is in expansiveness. I notice when I'm communicating with someone, and English isn't totally natural to them, the "mistakes" we make speaking with each other don't hinder my understanding at all, they tend to make it bigger. It feels better and I listen deeper. And I love this Jacques Lacan idea that "language isn't meant to inform, but to evoke." And I mean, that's very much at the heart of all this for me, too.

I believe the Lakota language is/was kept small. One thing that can cause: a person needs to bring things to life in their mind more contextually... so, less language can bring something else to life. This sort of operation is the essence of art?

For me, I don't know, it's all capable of being material. Art history. Identity. Habit. Prayer. Love. Plywood LOL. My experience of reacting to these things and making them is itself a material. The result—I don't really like that word though—the outcomes... I guess there's just an increased intimacy with it all. An increased intimacy with the world.

The ideas, the objects, the stories, the changes... and it's very much a lived thing.

> BS: I am interested in the relationship between a bootleg and a community. Especially bootlegging niche ideas or subjects and how they might act as talismans or totems for a particular group of people. I think about this in relation to the blog community

> that you were an active member of. Could you talk about this idea and how you developed a community around your practice?

MO: I really miss blogs. There's this story of these Dutch social scientists who studied the Deadheads who toured with the Grateful Dead—and btw, Dead bootlegs are a great example of a love community and economy—and they found that Deadheads who spent this fairly small amount of time together on the road were "better friends" with each other—by the measures that social scientists use to measure these things—than people they spent much more time with and had deeper connections to, like coworkers and neighbors. Which for me points to the idea that... I mean, it almost sounds naively simple but, when we're organizing our reality around something we love, there are different channels available and open.

I think the resulting entropy of love around music, or cultural objects and ideas... it's always naturally happening. It loves to happen. It's like trees!

> BS: You speak about ideas being "in the air," and for me, this translates to a very open notion of authorship. What are your thoughts on ownership? Is authorship important to you?

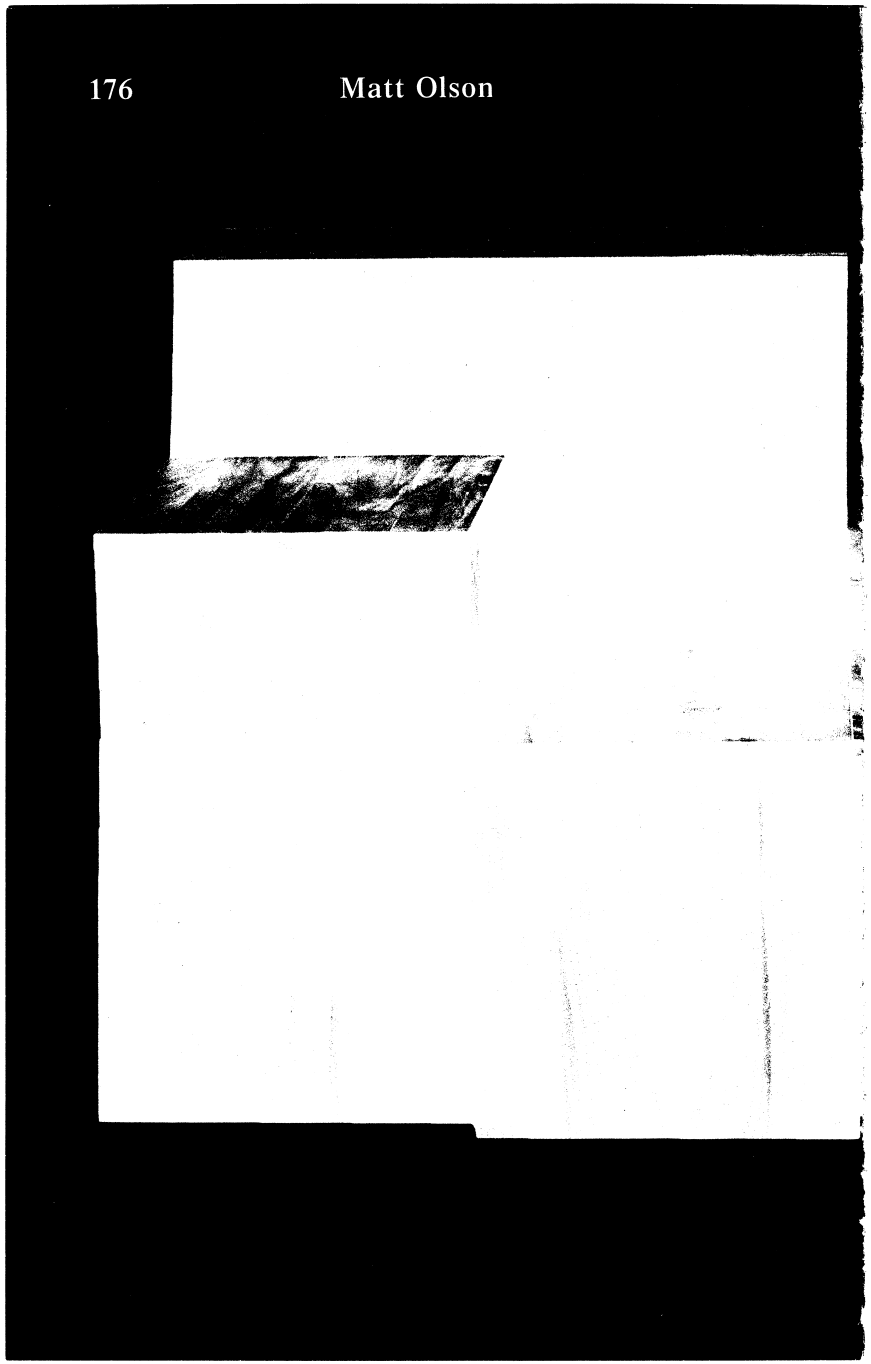
MO: This really weird thing happened in 2012. We made a project called *Settee* × *Three after Burton Photo (Public/Private/Secret)* which was three different versions of a Burton piece. One was poured concrete, installed on the street in front of a gallery called Sit & Read in Brooklyn. We'd been planning the piece for about a year and then the week before we did it,

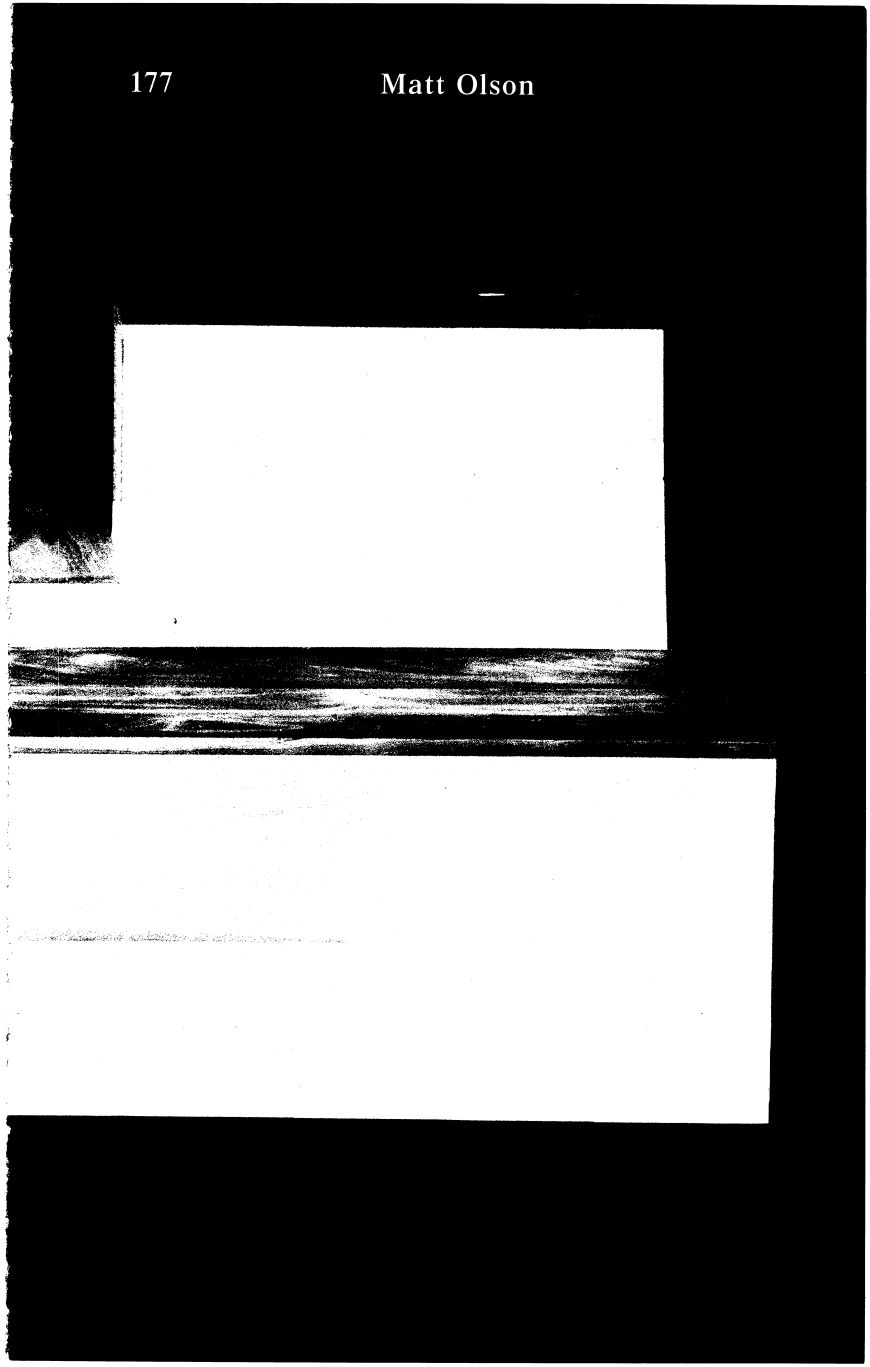
Oscar Tuazon did a concrete Burton chair in a show in Milan. I couldn't believe it. Literally the same week! What are the odds? At first I was bummed. There were a lot of competing stories available in me. Luckily a friend encouraged me to see how amazing and weird and magical it was. It led to some good exchanges with Oscar. I remember discussing this idea that something in the work demands that it's remade. That aliveness still interests me. That aliveness exists in the world... we're part of that, not separate from it.I'm not really against authorship as a thing? I just don't like what it does to me when I'm believing in it.

> BS: I'm curious if you see bootlegging as something subversive? Can a bootleg be an expression of love and betrayal simultaneously? Are you interested in "betraying" anything with your work?

MO: It's probably subversive to/for many people. I guess it sorta is to me? Maybe in certain circumstances we allow a bootleg to perform subversiveness? In one of the classes I teach, students are required to watch a talk Virgil Abloh gave at Harvard—it's a good talk for students—but there's a moment where he shows some images of Nike Off-White™ work (which are sorta bootleg like?) that haven't been released yet and he says something to give the impression that he's being sorta subversive or something but... c'mon, we know Nike was totally down with that. Sometimes the drunk performs the drunk as a way of continuing their drunkenness.

pp. 176–177: RO/LU, *Settee X Three (after BURTON photo, in Private, Public + Secret)* (2012)





It's amazing that you bring the idea of "betrayal" into this too... it's not a word I would *ever* think of and there's a nice shock seeing it. It makes me happy. Simultaneous love and betrayal. I do like that. But I'd wanna add way more things a bootleg is also being at the same time. I think our belief in language and thinking is always betraying *us*.

> BS: Love seems to be very much at the core of what you do. Could you expand on the relationship between bootlegging and love. I think specifically how bootlegging might relate to some of the complexities of love: understanding, acceptance, collaboration, ego, et cetera.

MO: I think the fact that all this work that I've done emerged through a garden design practice is maybe important to mention. I think the experience of designing something and then watching it change and grow... it's been instructive in ways that can't be articulated in language alone. We recently proposed remaking a garden by Fischli/Weiss. A bootleg garden. I really hope that comes to life! Love is hard to talk about. Even harder to write about. I know what it means to me, usually.

I guess my experience growing up in capitalism (which is a force that figures into all this and is *so* present we often don't see it), I learned a lot of stories about life and separateness and individuation that turned out to be destructive and limiting... and I think a lot of those stories are fueled by fear (disease) and I speak of love as something we don't really understand yet but, it's a direction we need to go in, together. It's an attitude. It's a way of seeing

the world. When we remake a piece, we're extending it, we're joining it, we're accompanying it... it is becoming us and we're becoming it.

And increasingly, I've liked the word/concept "joining" as a way to point toward all this. I've been making stuff lately, like, an acapella recording of a Japanese women's choir from the 1970s and phonetically learning the sounds and then adding my voice to the recording. Quietly and with humility. Or recording my voice speaking *with* Susan Sontag or James Baldwin. I see it as "joining." I'm joining it and it's joining me. Is that a bootleg?

I was into the Dead in college, mostly for the drugs, but I was changed by it all. And maybe I get the most excited about the Grateful Dead tapes. This whole world emerged around the love of Grateful Dead performances. Taping was allowed. People shared freely. And love can be super generative.

I still have a sense of skepticism that any of this can be resolved or that there's any sort of arrival at an answer. And reading back my responses here... all the talk of love makes me uncomfortable in my brain, not my mind, which includes the brain. But whenever I feel skeptical or anxious about an idea I'm excited about, I like to remember that one of my favorite people says "being skeptical is like choosing immobility as your primary mode of travel."

Title page (p. 160): Graphic from a 1963 Donald Judd exhibition poster from Green Gallery, New York